

The Appraisal of Power, the Power of Appraisal

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About the Work:

A routine aspect of working life for most organisations is performance management, and one aspect of performance management is the annual or bi-annual appraisal process (called many things including performance reviews, staff development reviews etc). The effectiveness of this method of reviewing and 'managing' performance remains open to debate (Baker, T., 2013).

Baker (2013) describes appraisal meetings as potentially resulting on one-way monologues, and so where each party is not always hearing or reacting to the other until finally some powerful conversation takes place

About the Author:

Jenny is recently retired from academia, having worked as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Brighton Business School. Jenny's use of her own poetry to teach organisational behaviour resulted in her being recognised with a teaching excellence award, and she is now an Honorary Fellow of the University of Brighton. The fellowship is in recognition of her contribution over and above her normal duties. Jenny continues to write poetry for publication as well as for community events. She now enjoys a more relaxed retirement devoted to children, grandchildren and creative enterprises.

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".....To explore, feel and express the felt, sensory and emotional aspects of management, leadership and daily organizational life"

A routine aspect of working life for most organisations is performance management, and one aspect of performance management is the annual or bi-annual appraisal process (called many things including performance reviews, staff development reviews etc). The effectiveness of this method of reviewing and "managing" performance remains open to debate (Baker 2013).

Baker describes appraisal meetings as potentially resulting in one-way monologues, and so this poem is written to reflect this experience and critically appraise the process from the perspectives of power, truth and pain.

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Appraiser (to be referred to as 1)

Appraisee (to be referred to as 2)

1.

*I'm doing an SDR today
Appraisal, performance review, and I may
Be some time in this room, getting very hot
Move my table to one side and make sure there's not
A barrier between the two of us so
We can't share our perspectives, can't use the GROW
Model. Goal and reality, options, that stuff
Have I moved the chairs and the table enough?
All the papers will be on my lap here, I think
And when he comes in here I'll get him a drink
Just some water, to put by his chair, and by mine,
On the floor - yes - I think the whole thing will be fine*

2.

I'm sitting here
Outside her door
She'll call me in
Just like before
She'll move her desk
She'll gaze at me
I wonder if it's me she'll see
I don't need this
My life's a mess
Things going on
Causing me stress
My job and I
We rub along
See eye to eye
I'm right, it's wrong

Don't need this talk
 A wasted day
 I wish this ache
 Would go away

1.

*My greeting is calm and I'm smiling at him
 I'm trying my best to be warm, welcoming
 My stomach turns over, my face feels quite hot
 The paperwork, chairs and the water – forgot
 To open the window, to let in the air
 We can't breathe in this workplace – I wave at his chair.
 An abandoned, relaxed and 'wherever' type wave
 He responds with a sigh and sits down. Must be brave.*

2.

I'm sitting here
 Inside her door
 She's waved me in
 And what is more
 She's pointed me
 Towards my chair
 I'm sitting here
 She's over there
 Her papers slipped
 Both of us sipped
 Water, just now.
 The floor's too low.
 She's breathing in
 We will begin

1.

*No table is reckless! My papers just slipped!
 I tried to look calm as I bent down and sipped
 At my water, as he did. I don't think he saw
 The mild panic in my face – or did he ignore
 It, or laugh at me, inwardly, knowing that I
 Am no good at this process – I don't know quite why.
 I'm the boss, I'm in charge and the ball's in my court
 I'll keep things professional, focused and short*

2.

She smiles at me
 God, make this quick
 Tell me it's good
 Then maybe pick
 An area for
 'Development'
 Something to change

To 'implement'.
 Some this or that
 Some bla bla bla
 Then do the notes
 My mind is far
 Away from here
 This heated tomb
 This strip-lit,
 Suffocating room

1.

*I'll say something good. Then I'll tackle the 'weak'
 I'll leave lots of silences so he can speak
 I'll summarise, reflect back, use my EQ
 I've been on the training course – know what to do.
 His expression is blank and he stares past my face
 At the picture of me and the kids in some place
 By the sea – it's my favourite – in a white frame
 I wish I were there now, playing a game
 With them both, like we used to – with a beach ball
 I wasn't at home when they learned how to crawl...*

2.

Her and her kids
 I wonder where?
 Looks lovely – wish
 That I were there.

She finally died
 A long, slow death
 I wasn't there
 For her last breath
 I was at work
 In open plan
 Doing some stuff
 Don't think I can
 Remember what.
 I didn't leave.
 Waited till six
 Then time to grieve.

1.

*It's been a hard year, and of course he won't know
 That demands on my time have made me feel quite low
 It's the loneliness really, the feeling that I
 Should know how, should be good, shouldn't have to ask why.
 I am smiling at him and I'm building rapport
 Open question, I'll listen –I can't do much more
 "How's it been? The past few months? What's good and what's not?
 "How are things for you? Why, where, when, who and what?"*

*(The six honest serving men – working a treat
 He's looking at me now – perhaps more upbeat?
 And preparing to share with me how things have been
 Open questions are marvellous – help you to glean
 Information and get things kicked off, so they say
 I wish I had worn something cooler today).*

2.

So how's it been?
 Well it's been shit
 I won't say that
 I don't want it
 To last too long
 Some platitudes
 Say nothing wrong
 No attitude
 She's very flushed
 I'm very tired
 She's trying hard
 To be admired.
*"It's been okay
 A few hiccups
 But we've coped well
 With the mix-ups
 And things have worked
 At least I guess
 They have because
 There's no real mess".*

At least not here
 In this white box
 Where thin, straight arrows
 Join the dots
 And boxes filled
 With acronyms
 And reports
 Made of antonyms
 And meetings
 Full of synonyms
 Keep it objective
 Keep things clear
 Anaesthetise me
 From the fear
 Of death and dying
 And the stress
 Of loneliness
 There's no real mess.

1.

*He's opening up, making things flow quite well
 And he's mentioned the mix-ups so no need to dwell*

*On the problems for too long, I'm pleased about that
 That's the difficult part for me, having to chat
 About weaknesses, failings, development needs
 I always feel nervous in case this precedes
 Some discussions about my own management style
 And some truths which will hurt, that I'll take with a smile
 But remind me of things said about me before
 When I left home for work - " Need to see you some more-
 Need to see you and talk with you - put down your phone -
 You sit in your office, you're working alone,
 What's the work for exactly when we are left here
 With no sense of a future - your input is rare".*

*I'm feeling so fragile - a lump in my throat
 I'm worried that he will use some anecdote
 To uncover a failure, weakness on my part
 I've tried so hard lately - don't want him to start
 Picking holes, raising issues, exposing my flaws
 They're not my fault, actually. I'm not the cause.
 He's annoying me, judging me, taking the lead
 None of this is my fault - it's not what I need.*

2.

Her face is red
 Her eyes look wet
 Don't understand
 Now I regret
 The mention of
 The mix-ups when
 I said that things
 Were fine and then
 I used the word
 'Mess' to describe
 The state of things
 Not as a jibe.
 I've upset her
 She's at a loss
 I've said something
 To make her cross
 I'll rescue things
 I'll try my best....

1.

*I need to get
 Things off my chest
 He asks too much
 As they all do
 I try so hard
 I'm human too.
 I'm sitting here
 He's sitting there*

*He's so relaxed
 Hasn't a care
 It's not my fault
 I just can't find
 The time for them
 I'm so behind
 With work and mail
 And all the stuff
 I have to do
 I've had enough.*

2.

I'm not sure what is happening here in this room
 Was it something I said? Did I say things too soon?
 She's uneasy, distracted, unsettled, am I
 Such a difficult subject? I just don't know why
 We are putting ourselves through this painful process
 When I see in her face that she cares even less
 Than I do, and it troubles her, haunts her to be
 My manager, desperately managing me.
 Doing all of the things the books say that she should
 Saying the things that she really hoped would
 Bring us closer, as colleagues, more empathy, then
 I would be more engaged, more productive, again.
 Doesn't work that way, does it? No meeting of minds,
 No heart in it, soul in it, two of a kinds.
 You see life is more messy than charts can portray
 And plans are derailed in a moment, a day
 There is life and there's death and there's stuff in between
 She died, I was here, sitting behind my screen
 Doing stuff, moving papers and playing with words
 There is life, there is death and then there's the absurd.

1.

*He doesn't know
 How much I long
 To laugh, to cry
 Do something wrong.
 Let down my guard
 Look in his eyes
 Tell him about
 The bright blues skies
 In Crete. We were
 On holiday
 Long time ago
 There's not a day
 When I don't wish
 For less of this
 And more of that
 To throw away
 My thinking hat*

*All six of them
 No strategy
 No vision, mission,
 Place to be
 Except with them
 Away from here
 No judgement, failure,
 Tension, fear*

2.

Our words fall on the floor in this white painted tomb
 On the cord carpet, soaking up crap in this room
 In a day we won't know what we said or agreed
 But she'll write it down, just in case, so we won't need
 To recall it, we can't because we both don't care
 For the record we'll have it, the words from thin air.
 She is anxious, I'm bored, she is not in control
 She's the boss, but she's not, she is playing a role
 I'll agree, I will nod and I'll give her her due
 I'll accept words of wisdom, agree with them too
 She's ok – she's just doing a job that they say
 Is the job she must do – they have shown her the way
 It's the 'human relations' school, Y theory stuff
 To relate to a human – why is it so tough?
 In this box, on this carpet, a plasterboard place
 Where feelings are hidden and we wear the face
 That we hung on the hook when we got home last night
 That we put on each morning. The mask is too tight.
 Take it off, take it off – which one of us will be
 The first one, the brave one – Me? Should it be me?

1. (To him)

You seem okay
 I wish I knew
 About your life
 And about you
 Don't want to cross
 Professional lines
 But in your eyes
 I see some signs
 That I would like
 To understand
 Hope you don't mind
 This isn't planned.

2. (To her)

Your kids look cute.
 The picture's nice
 The place you're in
 Like paradise.

Wish I were there
Things have been tough
Since losing her
It is enough
To just get up
And face the day
I'm sitting here
Nothing to say

1. (to him)

Sometimes you wish
I'd go away?
And as for me
I miss those days
I miss the freedom
Miss the ways
We used to play
I miss it all
You missed her death
I missed them crawl.

2. (to her)

And in this box
We choose to crawl
We slowly die
Inside, and all
Our wounds and cracks
Are taped and bound
To stop the light,
To mute the sounds
Of tears and laughter
Joy and pain
Let in the light
Let's live again

1. (to him)

You do your work
And I'll do mine
We'll meet and talk
Things will be fine
Tell me the truth
I'm only me
I'll write stuff down
For you to see
But it's my guess
That what we say
We will remember
Anyway.

2. (to her)

We will remember
Anyway
You seem alright.
You seem okay.
I will remember this, today.

1.(to him)

You seem alright
You seem okay
Thank you.
I think we found a way.
I will remember this, today.

References

Baker, T. 2013, *The End of the Performance Review*: London: Palgrave Macmillan.